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Section III: Gender-Based Violence and Society

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Section III: Gender-Based Violence and Society

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Abstract

This chapter is a transcript of an open-ended discussion that occurred between the authors when they met to discuss the subject matter of the third section of the book, which focuses on cultural and normative attitudes toward the problem of gender violence. As with the previous introductory dialogues, the discussion takes place after preliminary drafts have been completed and the authors share their thoughts on the subjects that they will each discuss in more detail in the following chapters. These include the culture of silence surrounding rape in India, the way masculine gender norms impact the treatment of women in Japan and the cultural factors that drive microaggressions targeted at LGBTQ+ people in South Africa.

Keywords: Gender violence; gender norms; society; Japan; India; South Africa

Gray: Nidhi, in an earlier chapter you asked me to comment on the commodification of the ‘lolita’ culture. It’s something I examine in more depth in the upcoming chapter, but there is very definitely a sexualisation and commodification of schoolgirls that is extremely bad for Japan’s international image. It has a reputation for this highly sexualised ‘lolita’ imagery, whether in books, games, animation or its music industry. However, this element of fetishisation is very localised to specific cultural groups, and sexual elements of it are rarely seen in general daily life. While Japan does have a semi-open sex industry, everyday life is far less sexualised than the West in terms of music, television and advertising.

Gender Violence, the Law, and Society, 123–129



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Japan has a far higher degree of purity and innocence in its 'daytime' life, a stark contrast to the commodified sex of its 'nighttime' life.

Shrivastava: Is there a specific reason for the overt sexualisation of youth?

Gray: Well, that's a key factor that is often overlooked, the focus on 'youth' is not always sexual. There is an element of Japanese culture that simply prizes youth and views the high school years in particular as one of the ideal stages of life. As a result, the commodification of this age, which is the focus of some of the country's most popular TV shows and pop groups, is not simply about sexuality but about people's emotional connection to that period. This extends to things such as Papa Katsu,¹ insofar as it is not always a sexual exchange that is involved but sometimes a purely emotional one, i.e. the men involved pay for the facade of an emotional relationship, rather than simply for sex, often as a response to an inability to form emotionally open relationships in their 'real' lives.

This does not, of course, make it healthier for either party, but it does make the situation a little more complex than it is often portrayed. At one extreme you have the focus on youth, which has its own genre called *seishun* in Japan, as a period of innocence, strong emotional bonds and boundless possibility, which is the selling point of so many TV dramas and idol groups. Then, at a mid-point of commodification, you have Papa Katsu, which is an exchange that can be either emotionally or sexually motivated. At the alternate far end, you have the more extreme sexual commodification of youth that can be seen in sexually explicit animation and DVDs featuring young children in skimpy clothes.

Dayal: And, is this, these products, are they legal in Japan?

Gray: Part of the problem is that the issue has yet to be treated, at a legal or political level, with the severity that it deserves. Possession of child pornography was only banned in Japan in 2015 and a casual attitude toward the sexualisation of children still seems commonplace, something I would personally ascribe to widespread ignorance of the extent of the problem rather than indifference to its effects. This links back to what I mentioned at the beginning of this book; Japan is generally a very safe and relatively chaste society, and people tend to avoid looking into or examining the more shadowy areas where problematic behaviour is often rampant. Like many elements of Japanese culture, its more extreme segments tend to get more attention overseas than they do in Japan itself. So, while most Japanese people do not often see the dark side of this area, it is something that international audiences have come to associate with Japan. In all likelihood, it will be these international views that generate sufficient pressure for the government to finally take stronger action in protecting young people from sexual predation.

Dayal: There are many places in the world that do not share the same view on sexual and gender violence. It is important that all countries equally consider the seriousness of these crimes.

Gray: That's right. And it's one of the key reasons why we're looking at these alternative perspectives. In the European Union and United States, discussions of

¹A form of commodified dating discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

gender violence or sexual crimes – while still dark and sensitive – have become relatively easy to examine in both social and institutional terms. But, in so many other parts of the world, there are these extra barriers where the social stigma is still placed on the victim and where there can be a distinct lack of support services to provide mental and emotional care for them.

Shrivastava: Actually, that's the common thread for all three of us, I think: that there are additional factors in some societies and cultures, things like shame, family honour or collective identity that can place additional burdens and stress upon women and that are not necessarily taken into account by standard Western approaches to these issues.

Dayal: Some families seem almost embarrassed when a member tells them what happened to them and the most important thing is that they don't want anybody to know about it.

Shrivastava: This reminds me of my dissertation work, where I came across the story of a son, who was mad at his mother for not killing herself as a way to protect the family honour. So he just refused to acknowledge her existence. But it's another kind of silencing, the failure of not just communities but families to acknowledge victimhood.

Dayal: I feel, for me, with the studies that I look at regarding South African gay men, there's this idea of just being a man or, rather, that you're less of a man, if you speak about any kind of problem with sexual or gender violence. They are told that they're 'being a sissy' or to 'man up'. Even when they just want to be open with their family they're not even given that relief due to the social barriers that can prevent basic discussion of some topics. It's such a tragedy.

Shrivastava: With sexual violence, another problem, in India at least, is that against young girls it is always private and usually with a relative, within the extended family. And, in these cases, it is the family's reputation that can be seen as the most important thing to protect, which gives power to the perpetrator. It can even empower them to do it again or to feel comfortable doing similar things to other people.

Dayal: Focusing on the perpetrator. Because, obviously, one has to go into 'why do they behave the way that they do' and, I think, some of these perpetrators say 'you know, well, this is just how we were brought up' or 'this is just the way society moulded' and they reject any personal responsibility for their behaviour.

Gray: And, of course, that rings false because, if it was true, you'd have an entire generation who were brought up under those social values all acting the same way, and they don't. Some develop quite liberal, open-minded views, and it's only a small group of them that end up with these warped patterns of behaviour. But these social forces can certainly influence people in these directions, create pressure to follow negative patterns or hold negative views of women and minorities. And they can certainly be used by them to justify their behaviour rather than reflecting upon it as a personal failing.

Shrivastava: This links to what I focus on in my chapter, which is that there is a culture of silence in India, again regarding certain elements of society that people like to avoid looking at. And recently there has emerged a trend in terms of how filmmakers are trying to change the conversation on rape victim-survivors. There

are multiple ways in which the silence exists, both in the public and private sphere, and one is that the media tend to be quiet about the names or identities of rape survivors, even where they have publicly spoken out, and so feminists argue that they are taking away the identity of the women and reducing them to just statistics which isn't fair to them.

There is often an attitude of, like, whatever happened to you, it's a personal thing and we don't want to hear about it and don't need to think about it. As though it will be harmful to them or for society for awareness of these crimes to become more widely known. The same thing happens with child sexual abuse, even more so in that case because usually the criminal is someone the victim knows, and so there is more pressure to keep things quiet. This is something that filmmakers are trying to disrupt by showing that these problems exist, and that they exist everywhere, across caste and class.

Gray: Where I'm coming from in this section is a little different. For my final chapter, I'm looking at how male gender norms, or specific variants of them, affect the way that women are treated both on an individual and institutional level. People often talk about 'toxic masculinity', but it's incredibly reductive as there are many types of masculinity, many of which are culturally specific, and more than one of which can be quite negative in the way it views or treats women.

Shrivastava: I'm actually reading a book at the moment called *The Damage* by Caitlin Wahrer, and it looks at the issue of rape among gay men, so I think it's both an example of what you mean by different types of harmful masculinity but also another culture of silence where the majority of people are still so uncomfortable with this topic and don't know how to discuss it openly.

Gray: That's part of what I'm looking at, in that some topics are silenced at the social level, where you are affecting others, or at least others feel you are affecting them, by speaking about it. But some topics are silenced at the personal level because we don't learn how to express ourselves or engage with the issues on an emotional level. In Japan, with many instances of men who have poor connections with women, it seems to stem from the social pressures that relegate the development of male emotional bonds to an insignificant level of priority.

When this kind of thing becomes generational you have young men growing up with emotionally removed father figures and so they see wives as being the same as mothers and having a very specific social role. The idea of treating them as equals, whether as friends, lovers or colleagues, becomes somewhat alien to them, and when they encounter a new type of woman who is less traditional and more assertive, they react with discomfort, fear or anger. And the real problem is that they don't have the emotional or communicative toolset to deal with these issues in an open and healthy manner. Again, this doesn't apply to all men, but it is common enough in Japan to be noticeable.

Dayal: This inability to communicate and to understand or properly express their emotions is something that I have also come across in relation to my research on microaggressions. When you see men who react negatively to gay men, often it is because the subject of homosexuality itself was taboo so there was never any discussion about it. And so when they encounter not just gay men, but even men who are comfortable emotionally, they react by being nasty and

labelling them as effeminate or unmasculine because they feel they can show they are not gay by being nasty to anyone who is gay or even displays femininity.

Gray: It's exactly the same with men showing more misogynist tendencies, an inability to interact comfortably with women, I think due to a lack of emotionally open male role models, creates hostility toward women.

Dayal: The idea of men communicating in an emotional way needs to be normalised.

Gray: I wonder, Nidhi, you focus on the use of media more than either of us, do you think there is a shift in how media is addressing these issues? Do you feel it is helping raise awareness, or helping break open the Overton Window in a way that lets young people access or discuss topics that were formerly taboo?

Shrivastava: Well, some of the films I actually look at address this topic in a way, for example the 2014 film called *Highway*, in which the daughter of a wealthy industrialist is kidnapped by a gang of lower-class men. However, the girl develops a bond with one of them and they share their tales of how they both experienced childhood abuse. In the end, this gives the girl the confidence to confront her family and her abuser and to challenge the culture of silence they had supported.

Another film is called *Article 15* from 2019, which is an even darker story about two girls who were gang-raped and murdered and how caste differences affect attitudes toward and investigation of the crimes. Finally, I also look at *Bombay Begums*, a recent TV drama on Netflix about a group of women who each have personal challenges to overcome, which highlights social problems affecting women that rarely get this kind of coverage in the media. So, you can kind of see that media, especially more international types like Netflix, are touching on topics that would have been hard to do in the past.

Gray: And this, again, kind of goes back to something we mentioned in the last section, which was that you have a middle-class who are highlighting problems that are affecting less well-off groups, or, in some cases, which are universal.

Shrivastava: Yes, I suppose that the awareness raised by these movies and shows, especially through Netflix, are accessible, though somewhat middle-class, in India at least. So, it is good in that it might be creating a wider understanding of different issues, or even creating a new set of future activists, but it is probably not doing a lot to change attitudes or cultural norms at lower economic levels. But maybe there is a chance that they might disrupt the silence. So while there are some problems with the pathway, I think it can be good if it can change the audience from being passive into being activists, not just being aware of the problems but actually doing something to address them.

Gray: In your case, you see media as a way of broadening this awareness. In my own chapter, I highlight education as the way to improve and inform people's understanding, especially young people. But it's clear, I think, that there are multiple paths that these messages can take and that, ideally, they would be reinforcing one another.

Dayal: Actually, that's precisely what I am looking at in my final chapter: the intersectionality of the messages and pressures that produce these problems – coming from family, from culture, from religion – and how they kind of work

upon each other to put down these layers that can end up silencing people. I guess you are looking in the opposite direction, at how positive layers of messaging can help lift that blanket of silence and give people a greater voice or more freedom.

Gray: Well, this is one area where education, I think, has a greater reach than media. In Japan, there is a very low level of effective sex education in schools. I think there might be a conservative view that if junior high school kids begin learning about sex then they will start having sex and teen pregnancies will increase, when, generally, the opposite is true and better education tends to prevent that. More importantly, it's an area, encompassing human relationships and emotional ties, that is frequently overlooked in education and which offers huge potential for preemptively addressing many social problems.

Dayal: Yes, if I can just pick up on that regarding microaggressions. It is an area that is still not clearly defined, and it is not something people really speak about. Instead, hate crimes and hate speech are far more common, and there is still such a lack of understanding of the other forms of abuse that are expressed more covertly. I think these undercurrents of discrimination are an area where education can be used to raise awareness.

Gray: Is there, do you think, a danger in that the media often focuses on more dramatic instances of abuse or discrimination, and that sometimes the more subtle forms get overlooked or even dismissed as being 'less important', even though, as we are well aware, the subtle and constant pervasive effect can be equally harmful over the long term?

Dayal: Well, I think there is that element of the overt and covert forms, and that the former definitely receives more attention. But you also tend to see issues of sexual discrimination being lumped in with gender discrimination, and in the latter field, the focus tends to be less on the experiences of men. So, to some extent, the stories of men, whether gay men or male rape, tend to be a little more silenced in that they don't receive the same kind of media attention, at least.

Shrivastava: Just to touch on that, perhaps you are speaking about news media, but I wanted to mention a show I saw called *Made in Heaven*, which is one of the few entertainment representations of gay Indian men that I have seen. It includes things like harassment from the police and also, I think, the subject of rape. I think this is part of that movement by activists or feminist filmmakers to tackle these kinds of untouched subjects. This show was made by Amazon, and I think these online services are offering room for more of this kind of activist entertainment to be introduced.

Gray: From what I have seen as well, I only really know of Netflix, but they seem to be doing a good job of finding and nurturing regional talent. So they can introduce more liberal issues, but do it in a way that it is coming more organically from within the region and made by people who properly understand the region and its complexities.

Shrivastava: Yes, the online platforms allow for less censorship and regulation, although now the Indian Government is trying to catch up on it. They're starting to kind of say, 'Okay, we want you to know we'll start banning Netflix or whatever, or some of your shows, if you don't make these changes'. And it's things like, in *Bombay Begums* there was a whole section on menstruation and the

government. Some media were saying it has a negative effect on women by sexualising them faster, which is obviously nonsense. What it is doing is creating a space for dialogue and education that wasn't there when I was growing up. I certainly couldn't speak to my mother comfortably about anything connected to sex when I was younger, and that is changing. But, it may be that it is changing mostly for the middle class and the urban residents, and that the lower class and rural people are still trapped by these kinds of barriers and old-fashioned attitudes.

Gray: We have been speaking a lot of the importance of Western researchers and activists being aware of the complexities of other regions and cultures, but it's good that you point out how important it is to remember that even where successful efforts are being made to introduce more progressive values in a culturally informed manner, there are still groups locally that are unlikely to have access to those messages. It's so important to build direct connections with the people who are most directly affected, and I think one of the privileges we have is that while those people often cannot travel to other countries or meet the people in them who might share their problems or live in similar circumstances, we can act as a bridge of sorts, to help build connections and share information on those underreported areas.

Shrivastava: This is why speaking like this, or meeting at conferences, is so important: it allows us to really explore and understand the issues in a more complete way that really brings the focus back to the human element of the issues and the fact that it is not an abstract problem but things that affect real people each and every day.

Dayal: I couldn't agree more. I know I can learn a lot from reading the chapters that you have written, but having a chance to speak with you and explore these issues in a more natural manner makes a huge difference, both in helping to understand the topic and also in bringing home its reality.